

NS 1251: Product Management Process Training

by Guy W. Wallace, partner

NS 1251: Product Management Process Training, an eight-day keystone course in an overall curriculum of more than 120 potential modules of training, had greater than 400 percent ROI for our client. And we added all the costs to the “I” that we could think of, because the “R” figure was so high!

This project won an International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) Award of Excellence for Best Instructional Product in 1989 for Gerry Kaufhold and me, for both its instructional design and its results achieved.

It all began in 1986 at the taxicab stop at the San Francisco airport immediately following the ISPI (then NSPI) conference. We bumped into one of the key training managers of Network Systems who had a project on which he wanted us to bid. Three other vendors had already made proposals, and he was looking for something else from someone else. I ended up in New Jersey presenting my first ISPI presentation on performance-based Curriculum Architecture DesignSM (CAD) (which I had just delivered for the first of ten times at ISPI, and which I still have on the original double-wide flip chart easel paper).

They liked the engineering approach of our CAD methodology, and we ended up with the contract to first conduct a CAD project for the 1,100 product managers of AT&T’s Network Systems business units and then build many of the courses within that curriculum design.

NS 1251 finally ended for us in 1993 with our 31st delivery of the eight-day course. Pete Hybert or I, among others at SWI at the time, facilitated in each of the 31 deliveries of this intense, simulation exercise-centered structured learning experience, and it was draining.

Network Systems (NS), now Lucent Technologies, began as Western Electric, the equipment manufacturer for AT&T and all of the subsidiary Bell Operating Companies—Illinois Bell, New Jersey Bell, Southwestern Bell, etc.

NS, with the support of Bell Labs engineers, was the main source for telephone equipment for each of the Bell operating companies and many other non-Bell phone system operating companies.

NS’s need to develop its product managers was a residual result of the 1984 modified final judgment (MFJ), Judge Greene’s plan after the U.S. Justice Department’s antitrust action to break up the monopoly of AT&T succeeded. AT&T would no longer own its primary customers.

The product manager role would be much more important in the nonmonopoly days, because the marketplace would not be owned by the manufacturer, who would no longer be in a position to sell whatever they manufactured and sell at whatever price they could justify. The product development and management decisions would no longer be based on an “extend the technology” mindset, as the Bell Labs engineering world had grown accustomed to during the past century.

It was a major sea-change for AT&T Network Systems and Bell Labs. It required marketing insights into what the new customers would buy if the decisions were left up to them (as they now were), and business and financial decision-making preempted all views, versus technology decision-making dominating management’s time and attention.

It was an exciting series of projects.

The NS 1251 project was one of many projects over a seven-year span where my colleagues and I were involved in the development of more than 25 days of group-paced training, plus more than 3,000 pages of self-paced instruction and information.

The eight-day NS 1251: Product Management Process Training course was the *keystone course* in the entire curriculum architecture for the product managers responsible for decisions with hundred million dollar implications for a giant corporation. The stakes were high for the client. The needs of the diverse target audience were varied—hence, the highly modularized approach of the curriculum design.

NS 1251 taught and provided ample practice opportunities for both seasoned and rookie product managers regarding the basics of business case development, product life cycle management, financial forecasting and monitoring, cross-functional team leadership, and a varied set of interpersonal skills.

The interpersonal skills included time management, active listening, and verbal communication behaviors appropriate to the job of wrangling with the representatives of many different organizations, each with different agendas and opinions on what to do and why, how and when to do it, and who exactly will do it.

All of this was accomplished during the eight days through a series of lectures and participation in five phases of an ever-expanding/increasingly difficult simulation exercise focused on managing a product through its life cycle stages. The NS 1251 simulation exercise taught product management via the fictional but real video products. NS 1251 participants were paired to manage five different video products through the typical issues associated with that phase of the life cycle, and then watched four other product management teams do the same on other products in the product family.

The class held 20 student participants. Ten participants were put into two major teams, Alpha and Omega, who would run through the exercise in parallel. The class could be run for any number of groups of ten, each requiring one facilitator.

The ten individual participants would be assigned in pairs to lead five different product teams, one each for camera, recorder, editing deck, cables and connectors, and tape.

For each of the five phases of the life cycle, the simulation exercise covered the five product rounds. In each product round, the five teams of two people each would be responsible as the product management team leaders (they were role-playing their jobs as product managers). They were leading a cross-functional team through data review, business strategy development and (high-level) operations planning, implementation plan schedule development, and financial forecasting.

The other teams of two role-players at the table included product development (Bell Labs) engineers, manufacturing, and sales and service groups. The participants would get to learn something from having to sit in the shoes of their real counterpart organizations and voice their real concerns. It was an eye-opener for many.

They would all play their assigned roles for the first product round (camera) and conduct their product team meeting, conclude the meeting, and then address the next product (recorder). Everyone would systematically change roles to be played for each of the rounds. If I started in the first meeting as a member of the sales team for camera, I would then successively play the roles of service for recorder, product manager for edit deck, development engineer for cables and connectors, and manufacturing for the tape product.

I would have experienced it all in the eight days. I would have co-conducted five meetings as the product manager and honed my agenda development/meeting facilitation/conflict resolution/financial calculating/business case and business plan development skills with five rounds of hands-on practice.

I would have had to represent the issues of related/partner organizations as I role-played their parts in the exercise. It would have felt eerily familiar.

I would have played the other roles, observed the other styles, and learned from my participation in the other 20 product team meetings I would have observed. Whew is right!

The role-players would start each product round within each phase of the life cycle by reading four to five pages of data, letters, notes, etc., from an exercise Datapak and then begin their meeting.

Each pair of participants was then loaded with information and instructions from back at their ranch (to inject political garbage into the *sometimes very real simulation*) and the meeting would begin. But before starting, they'd get their voice mail to see if any of the rest of the team's colleagues back at the ranch had sent any newer instructions or data.

The product management team would roll the dice and pick up breaks cards that would change somebody's Datapak data, and then everyone would have to respond accordingly.

Then the five pairs of leaders for each product would take turns planning and conducting their product team meetings. After all five product team meetings had been held, and everyone rotated through all of the roles and experienced five different sets of situations in a single life cycle phase, the pair of product managers would sit down for two hours and develop their business case or plan, depending on where they were in the life cycle.

Nick Bridges and I developed the first version and began the deliveries with the pilot-test session in October 1987. Eight sessions were delivered in 1988. Pete Hybert, and a former co-worker Dee Kane, joined me in January 1989 and started their first days as participants in NS 1251, with the intent that both would take over the deliveries from me. They did, although I did the international deliveries with others from the client organization.

The last ten deliveries of NS 1251 included six in The Netherlands. The very last delivery was for the Wireless business unit of NS in January 1993.

NS 1251 was a great learning experience for both Pete and me. My greatest insights into business in general and financial management specifically were learned in this project. This project led to many more for NS, where even more was learned about business planning, marketing, manufacturing, sales, finance, service, public relations, contracting, operations, various quality tools and techniques, and many, many other learnings!

Our many thanks to Jim Costello, who was our first internal project manager and who participated in all of the original project tasks. Later Maddy Hertzbruggin, Al Madden, Andrea Stone, and Scott Steward were also involved. They were part of the immediate client organization, led by Gerry Kaufhold. O. Wayne Stewart, of the Market Operations organization, was their leader/sponsor.

What an experience for all of us involved! We are very thankful for this and all of the other opportunities we had at Network Systems to develop performance-based training.

Other related NS projects for product managers include

- The PM Novel
- Internal and External Influences on the PM Function
- The PM Curriculum Introduction Video and Planning Guide

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